Magdalena Grabias: Steampunk Visions: Retro-futurism in Cinema and Television

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Abstract:

Steampunk cinema is as old as the medium itself. The subject of retro-futurism and first attempts to create its visual stylistics on silver screen can be traced back to Georges Méliès' 1902 cinematic short *A Trip to the Moon*. Throughout the history of visual media, the interest in the subject can be found in numerous cinematic and television productions, including the adaptations of the classics of the 19th century literature like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Herbert George Wells' *The Time Machine*, Robert Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, as well as the new stories based on the original contemporary scripts. The aim of this article is to explore the phenomenon of retro-futurism in cinema and television, and the ways of transferring Steampunk visions of science and technology, as well as monsters and the supernatural onto the screen.

Keywords: Steampunk, Retro-Futurism, Cinema, Television, Gothic, Monsters

Abstrakt: Steampunkowe wizje. Retrofuturyzm w kinie i telewizji

Stylistyka Steampunk pojawiła się na ekranie bardzo wcześnie w historii kina. Retrofuturyzm i pierwsze próby wizualnej reprezentacji nurtu przypisać można już Georgesowi Mélièsowi i jego *Podróży na księżyc* z 1902 roku. Poprzez kolejne dekady rozwoju mediów wizualnych zainteresowanie tematyką widoczne jest się w wielu kinowych i telewizyjnych produkcjach odwołujących się do klasyków XIX-wiecznej literatury, takich jak: *Frankenstein* autorstwa Mary Shelley, *Wehikuł czasu* Herberta George'a Wellsa, *Doktor Jekyll i pan Hyde* Roberta Stevensona, jak również w zupełnie nowych historiach, opartych na oryginalnych scenariuszach. Celem artykułu jest eksploracja stylistyki Steampunk i tematyki retrofuturyzmu i ich reprezentacji w kinie i telewizji.

Słowa kluczowe: Steampunk, retrofuturyzm, kino, telewizja, kino gotyckie, potwory

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Dr Magdalena Grabias is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. She specialises in film studies, American studies, Gothic studies, literary translation and music journalism. Her academic publications include numerous articles in Polish and English propagating film, music and theatre viewed from the perspective of philosophy, semiotics, anthropology and popular culture. Her book *Songs of Innocence and Experience: Romance in the Cinema of Frank Capra* was published in 2013 in the UK by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

O autorce:

Dr Magdalena Grabias, absolwentka filologii angielskiej, kulturoznawca, filmoznawca, dziennikarz muzyczny, jest adiunktem w Zakładzie Kultury Wizualnej w Instytucie Kulturoznawstwa UMCS w Lublinie. Jej badania naukowe obejmują problematykę kinematografii światowej i zjawisk kulturowych związanych z kinem postrzeganym w kontekście filmoznawstwa, semiotyki, filozofii, antropologii oraz kultury popularnej. Jest autorką licznych publikacji w języku angielskim propagujących sztukę filmową, muzykę i teatr.Jej monografia na temat twórczości amerykańskiego reżysera Franka Capry pt. *Songs of Innocence and Experience: Romance in the Cinema of Frank Capra* została wydana w 2013 roku przez prestiżowe wydawnictwo brytyjskie Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Inspired by new possibilities instigated by the Industrial Revolution and baptised almost a century and a half later as "Steampunk", the phenomenon has manifested in a wide range of fields including art, fashion, literature and film. Currently, the term is often used to describe the subculture based on interest in retro-futurism, which most frequently refers to the visual media pop-culture texts and is mainly displayed in pseudo-Victorian fashion and celebrated during conventions and theme meetings.

In literature, Steampunk is a sub-genre of science fiction that incorporates the images of industrial steam-driven machinery, aesthetics of futuristic Victorian fashion, and encompasses fantasies and visions of a post-apocalyptic future world. Steampunk fiction, therefore, often elaborates on an alternative fantasy-based Victorian history and as such is sometimes referred to as "neo-Victorian".

Technology and industrialism are as frequent determinants of Steampunk fiction as monsters and elements of the supernatural. Thus, Steampunk constitutes a hybrid-genre deriving from science fiction and combining core features of fantasy and Gothic horror.

The term "Steampunk" was coined by the writer K.W. Jeter in 1987 in a letter to a science fiction magazine *Locus*, in search of a proper name for the literature works written in the style described above. However, the precursors of Steampunk speculative fiction include the 19th century authors specialising in science fiction romances like Mary Shelley and her seminal Gothic novel *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), or the post-apocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826); Jules Verne and his *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and other novels; and H. G. Wells with his famous *Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1897). Later the style was revived in the 1950s by the authors like Mervyn Peake, best known for *Titus Alone* (1959) and Michael Moorcock and his *The Warlord of the Air* (1971).

The romanticised dim and smoky images of 19th century industrial London, a curious patchwork of mystery-filled past and futuristic dreams, as well as visions of far-away travels and exploration of space, quickly stirred the imagination of cinema directors. The fantasy genre was, in fact, one of the first that found its way to the silver screen in the films of the French photographer and illusionist, Georges Méliès, who as early as in 1902 directed a 15-minute-long feature *A Trip to the Moon*. The film inspired by, among others, Verne's novels *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *Around the* Moon (1870), offered a Steampunk vision of the first journey to the Moon. The group of scientists reach the Moon in a rocket and are given a chance to explore it, as well as to meet the Moon's dwellers. The psychedelic vision of the giant mushrooms growing from the astronomers' umbrellas, flying comets, human-faced stars and the unfriendly greenish Selenites, will often be cited and referred to in future film productions, making Méliès a pioneer in the cinematic genre of fantasy and science fiction. Since then, Steampunk style and themes have often been explored and developed in cinema and television. In his book *Steampunk Bible*, Jeff VanderMeer proposed the following equation to capture the essence of Steampunk:

"STEAM PUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man/baroque stylings) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot."[1]

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[1] Jeff VanderMeer, "It's a Clockwork Universe, Victoria. Measuring the Critical Mass of Steampunk" in *The Steampunk Bible. An Illustrated Guide to the World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles,*

The accuracy or inaccuracy of the above thesis, as well as the ways of transferring Steampunk motifs onto screen will be the subject of this article.

Science and technology

One of the core features of Steampunk is its fascination with technology, of which roots can be found in the rapidly changing and developing landscape of the Industrial Revolution era. For Shelley, Verne, Wells and early filmmakers, the transformation was real and happening before their eyes. Therefore, the subjects would naturally trigger an interest and provoke artistic response. Machinery, this new demon of the Luddites, in early writings was presented as still relatively innocent and serving to support the progress rather than a threat to the mankind. Although, the visionaries did not stray from exploring the dangers, as it is suggested in the first issue of the science fiction *Steampunk Magazine*: "[…] Steampunk machines are real, breathing, coughing, struggling and rumbling parts of the world. They are not the airy intellectual fairies of algorithmic mathematics but the hulking manifestations of muscles and mind, the progeny of sweat, blood and tears and delusions. The technology of Steampunk is natural; it moves, lives, ages and even dies."[2] Such a "humanised" picture of the machines and technological developments, was used by Verne in order to glorify the possibilities of far-away travels and explorations of the world. A steam-powered mechanical elephant was the means of transport across India.[3] Steam trains and hot air balloons allowed people to travel freely across the world. For Wells, the construction of a time machine was the result of positive attitude towards science and technological development and a way to support the idea of the world's progress. These stories were frequently adapted into films, providing an additional visual attraction to the phenomenon.

In two cinematic versions of Wells' *The Time Machine* - the 1960 film directed by George Pal, and the 2002 version directed by Simon Wells, Steampunk imagery is conspicuous from the very first frames. Both movies present a young scientist, who succeeds in constructing a machine allowing them to travel in time. Throughout both stories, the men are given to travel into the future and to

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Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature, ed. Jeff VanderMeer and S. J. Chambers (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), p. 9.

[2] The Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective (NYC)*,* "What Then, Is Steampunk? Colonizing the Past So That We Can Dream the Future" in *Steampunk Magazine*, (Strangers in a Tangles Wilderness, 2007), p. 4.

[3] Jules Verne, *The Steam House*, originally published in France by Pierre-Jules Hetzel in 1880.

experience life within post-apocalyptic civilisations. In both cases, following the plot of Wells' original novel, humans fail to create a utopian society and the world is ruled by primitive forces focused on survival alone.

It is the 19th century industrial reality of London in one case, and New York in the other, that is filled with Steampunk imagery, which in both films denominate progress, positive development and glorifies the power of science and the human mind. The house and study of George Wells (Rod Taylor), the protagonist of the 1960 version, is equipped with machinery of various sort, including modern lamps of futuristic design and an impressive collection of clocks, which fill the rooms with the unceasing rhythmical tick-tocking signifying the mercilessness of passing time. The lab of the scientist, however, promises victory over time. The room is full of requisites – tools, vials, and spare parts of machinery. The colours of most of the film, but especially the 19th century sequences are warm sepia-tinted browns and reds – characteristic for the Steampunk style and conveying the atmosphere of retro and progress combined together. It is within the confines of the lab that we first see the time machine. A curious construction of cogs, springs and levers, a massive brass circling shield and an obligatory burgundy leather seat, constitutes a 19th century idea of modernity and futuristic design. The lab and the vision of the machine returns relatively unchanged in the 2002 version of the story. However, while the lab is complemented merely with blackboards showing numerous mathematical equations, the machine itself, although kept in the similar brass and leather Steampunk style of the earlier film, is much bigger, more complex and more multilevel in build.

The Time Machine presents another intrinsic motif of retro-futuristic fiction, namely the figure of a "mad scientist". A prototypical mad scientist is credited to Mary Shelley and her doctor Frankenstein, the character from her eponymous 1818 novel. Frankenstein was an eccentric scientist with a mind not limited to the confining boundaries of the possible. His ambition, determination and ability to see beyond the realistic and the tangible, eventually led him to succeed in his endeavours to create life from death and, with use of forces of nature and advanced machinery, to animate a creature built from dead human flesh. The famous Frankenstein's monster is a complex character and almost as controversial and morally elusive as his creator. Shelley's story, however, remains a quintessence of early science fiction and fantasy speculating on the alternative possibilities and the power of science. The motif of a mad scientist capable to cross the boundaries of reason, recurs in numerous works of fiction, not excluding film.

Interestingly, the characteristics of a mad scientists remains practically unchanged in most of the visual media offerings. As *Steampunk Bible* suggests, "to Verne, rogue scientists were individuals who had gone mad due to their overweening arrogance and the power of their imaginations. To Wells, rogue scientists might indeed be arrogant, but their beliefs about the importance of scientific progress were empowered by nations and supported by society."[4] This social need combined with individual ambitions of the scientific minds resulted in a number of mad scientists. Such is the case of subsequent adaptations and filmic interpretations of Shelley's novel, where madness of the scientists varies in depth and intensity. The motif is also used in other Steampunk films like the 2003 *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* directed by Stephen Norrington, or the popular television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016).

Based on the comic book series by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is a Steampunk adventure and action movie featuring crossover themes and gathering numerous fictional characters known from prominent Victorian literary works. A group of superheroes gifted with extraordinary or supernatural powers is formed to fight a terrorist organisation led by the Fantom (Richard Roxburgh) threatening international security and peace. Drawing on the books by Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Bram Stoker, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe, Gaston Leroux, Mark Twain and others, the League consists of Allan Quatermain (Sean Connery), Captain Nemo (Naseeruddin Shah), Mina Harker (Peta Wilson), The Invisible Man (Tony Curran), Dorian Gray (Stuart Townsend), Tom Sawyer (Shane West) and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde (Jason Flemyng). Each of the characters preserves the original traits as featured in the books with only little variations – Mina Harker, for instance, following the events described in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, is now a vampiress.

Set in the late 19th century, the film plays on Steampunk stylistics enriched by the visions of futuristic machinery including, modern weaponry (tanks, guns and cross-bows), a phonograph capable of recording speech and transferring hidden harmful sounds that can trigger a bomb, as well as the famous Nautilus, the submarine of Captain Nemo, and an automobile – both more resembling the grandiose equipment of Ian Fleming's James Bond rather than 19th century inventions. Both vehicles possess the ability to translocate with exceptional speed; they are equipped with numerous marvellous devices that eventually save our

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[4] Jeff VanderMeer and S. J. Chambers (ed.), *Steampunk Bible*, op. cit., p. 19.

heroes from failure. The motif of a mad scientist/inventor/doctor can in this case be attributed to more than one person, as, out of necessity, most of the members of the League have mastered the art of transgressing the boundaries of the possible by means of embodying ideas into life and transforming them into physical objects of comfort and safety.

Such an approach recurs in other adventure fantasy films, where fanciful Zeppelin-shaped aircrafts and robots tend to help humankind. These works reflect the fashion for and the ongoing love-affair with Steampunk imagery and "outdated and baroque technologies."[5] However, retro-futurism does not escape criticism either. The recent British-American TV series, *Penny Dreadful*, treats the subject of rapid industrialisation with ambiguity echoing the concerns of the Victorian working class. Set in England at the turn of the century, the series depicts members of various professions and paints the picture of social anxiety and dissatisfaction with the present situation, which threatens to replace human force with the machines, thus leaving workers jobless and without the means of securing a basic income. Throughout the episodes the negative opinions of the characters are expressed openly pointing to industrial accidents with use of the "dreadful machines and cogs"[6] and referring to the contemporary times as to an era of "men and iron, steam-engines and turbine".[7] The social criticism goes even deeper with the prophecy of the end of time and annihilation of the light and men.[8]

Nevertheless, a contradictory positive vision of progress and technological development is also present in *Penny Dreadful*. Telephone, telegraph, photo cameras, diverse machinery in the offices of the police and press, vapour-breathing steamboats, as well as the equipment of the science-driven lab of the mad scientist, Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway), prove necessary, useful and beneficial to both – the functioning of the modern-day society as well as the comfort and well-being of the individuals. However, the image is distorted by the bleak subjects and motives of poverty, death, madness, obsession and elements of the mysterious and the supernatural, which are the canvas of the series.

Therefore, it occurs that while Steampunk stylistics remains visually attractive and reminiscent of the retro-futuristic dreams and visions, as well as the

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[5] Jeff VanderMeer and S. J. Chambers (ed.), *Steampunk Bible*, op. cit., p. 53.
[6] *Penny Dreadful*, TV series created by John Logan, Great Britain and USA: Showtime and Sky, 2014-2016. Season 1, episode 3.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

human longing for "positive" progress, the tone of the Steampunk texts can also express ambiguity about issues like morality, and the criticism pointing towards the dystopian reality, which puts the fate of an individual into the hands of industrial tycoons and inhuman machinery.

Monsters and the Supernatural

A number of Steampunk films and TV shows turn with nostalgia towards the 19th century literary fiction and explore with eagerness the subjects common to the Gothic literature and horror. The iconic supernatural characters and monsters get romanticised and revived again on screen, and in the process often acquire a new Steampunk image or gain a retro-futuristic setting. While some critics christen this branch of speculative fiction as a Gaslamp Fantasy[9], others are inclined towards alternative names for the phenomenon. Among others, the term "Steamgoth" was coined by James Richardson-Brown to refer to "Steampunk expression of fantasy and horror with a 'darker' bent."[10] In contrast to the culture of Cyberpunk, focused on artificial intelligence and high tech and cybernetics, and usually set in futuristic post-industrial dystopias, Steamgoth concentrates on the past – most often Victorian or Edwardian era, and offers sentimental visions of the past perceived from a futuristic perspective. Although darkness and looming threat of ill-applied industrialism is present in both, cyberpunk in film is considered closer to the aesthetic and thematic stylistics of *film noir*, while Steampunk bears Gothic connotations.

One of the most beloved motifs recurring on screen in an amazing number of direct and indirect treatments of the story is Mary Shelley's Gothic vision of the Frankenstein's monster. A dream of possessing the power of a demiurge - of creating life from death or breathing life into a machine has incessantly inspired the imagination of artists. Contemporary filmmakers often choose to interpret the tragic story of the prototypical mad scientist and his creation in terms of Steampunk aesthetics. Due to the original 19th century setting and the premises of the novel, *Frankenstein* fits easily into the industrial scenery and conveys human anxieties and distrusts of the fast-changing world and excessive dehumanisation of everyday reality.

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[9] Jeff VanderMeer and S. J. Chambers (ed.), *Steampunk Bible*, op. cit., p. 78.
[10] Richardson-Brown, James (2008). "Steampunk - What's That All About". *The Chronicles*. 2 (9). p. 10.

Such concerns serve as canvas for the premises of *Penny Dreadful*. The series constitutes a Steampunk Gothic tale dutifully gathering in one filmic universe many of the iconic fictitious Victorian characters, known from the novels of Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, Oscar Wilde and other Gothic and horror writers. The story revolves around a medium Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), Sir Malcolm Murrey (Timothy Dalton), bound together by a tragic past history, and an American gunslinger Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett), a mercenary. The trio attempts to solve the mystery of the supernatural creatures responsible for the recent abduction of Sir Malcolm's daughter, Mina Harker (Olivia Llewellyn), who in the course of the series turns out to be a vampiress. The protagonists are aided by more or less willing recruits. One of the helpers is a young doctor, Victor Frankenstein.

Obsessed with science and determined to transgress the barriers of the possible, Frankenstein leads his experiments in the shadowy confines of his study. He is a poet and a romantic believing in the power of human mind and greater deeds which, in his opinion, ought to be the ambitions of every man of science. However, the series proposes an alternative version of Shelley's story. The doctor succeeds in his endeavours much earlier than we expect. While we are offered the chance to witness the mad scientist at work and see his creation at its birth, it is only in retrospection and following the dramatic passing of a good-natured Proteus (Alex Price), that we learn about Caliban (Rory Kinnear), Frankenstein's "firstborn", whom he had rejected with disgust due to the creature's ugliness and crudeness. After years Caliban finds Frankenstein and, bound on revenge, kills Proteus and aspires to turn the life of his creator into a living hell. We learn that, like the original Frankenstein's monster, Caliban was left to survive on his own and came to experience the hatred of superstitious crowds, and the kindness of strangers. He even got offered a job of a backstage assistant and lodgings in a theatre by a man who attributed his unearthly appearance to an industrial accident. However, Caliban never forgot Frankenstein and the pain of being abandoned. Hence, he decided to seek the "demon" who had created him and having found him, he demanded a supernatural immortal bride for himself, thus heralding another recurring motif in the works of fiction.

Another Gothic figure recalled and reinterpreted in *Penny Dreadful* is Dracula, a vampire master responsible for Mina Harker's disappearance. He commands an army of vampires, who are subject to his will. As in Stoker's novel, he has his Renfield-like followers – humans completely devoid of their own will or power to decide, and compelled to drink blood, even though they are not vampires themselves. Original literary motifs return on numerous occasions: the vampires

arrive to the shore and reside on a plague ship, they drink blood, wake up at night and sleep during daylight. One of the scenes offers a faithful recreation of the famous image of Nosferatu from Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's 1922 loose cinematic adaptation of Stoker's novel[11]: bald figure of a vampire with long sharp teeth, crooked claws and demonic eyes looks up through the ship's crates to appraise the surroundings.

However, the Dracula plot in *Penny Dreadful* is also not a straightforward copy of the novel. The vampire, though definitely based on Stoker's supernatural villain, turns out to be an envoy of some greater power. The Master, to whom the vampires in the film refer on several occasions, represents the Egyptian lore. Connected to this ancient deity is Vanessa Ives, a medium, who is believed to be possessed by the Devil and experiencing fits of violence resulting from her paranormal clairvoyant abilities. Throughout the series, the motifs of the uncanny, madness, and possession by evil spirits occur in connection with Vanessa. She is seduced and shown in a sexual act with the Devil and, despite her attempts to fight the evil within her, she is constantly subjected to its power and remains in its grip. On one occasion Ethan succeeds in performing an exorcism and frees her body for a while. However, the result is temporary. Throughout the course of the events it is implied that Vanessa is an incarnation of Amunet, the Egyptian primordial goddess. With help of an acquainted Egyptologist and Doctor Frankenstein, the characters are able to discover and partially decipher a set of hieroglyphics carved inside one dead vampire's body. The writing turns out to come from the Egyptian Book of the Dead and constitutes a resurrection spell invoking deities Amunet and Amun-Ra, who, if united, will bring about the apocalypse.

Dorian Gray is also present in the filmic diegesis of *Penny Dreadful*. Handsome, charming, forever young with his life suspended within a demonic portrait hidden on the attic, Dorian is a 19th century dandy and hedonist. As in Wilde's novel, he is utterly devoid of morality and bent on gathering spiritual and carnal pleasures just to avoid boredom. The attractive man has the power to entice both men and women. The sexual act with Vanessa triggers her paranormal trance, which results in the mutilation of her body and almost causes her death. The above-mentioned characters are just several of the examples borrowed from the classics of literature and developed for the sake of the new narrations. In *Penny Dreadful* the fate and paths of the iconic Gothic characters are intertwined with

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[11] *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*), directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Germany: Film Arts Guild, 1922.

each other enhancing the impression of reality and through their familiarity intensifying the feeling of darkness and horror.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen presents a different take on the subject of monsters and the supernatural. The gentlemen, gathered together for the sake of saving the world, are depicted as superheroes in pursuit of the common goal, regardless of their original predicaments. In accordance with the film title, all of the members of the League possess supernatural or extraordinary powers. Most of them, however, escape the univocal label of a monster. A vampiress Mina Harker, Dorian Gray - an immortal with his soul trapped in a picture, the Invisible Man, and even Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde, who regularly undergoes his violent transformations, are capable of heroic deeds in the name of the greater good despite their supernatural predispositions. Even though Dorian Gray eventually turns out to be a traitor and an ally of M, a curious combination of James Bond's boss and Conan Doyle's Professor James Moriarty, he is portrayed more as a straying human than a cold-blooded monster. The universe of the film, while maintaining the elements and motives necessary for Steampunk, is not as dark and certainly much less Gothic than *Penny Dreadful*. *The League*, therefore, should be considered Steampunk adventure cinema, which aims to entertain by means of toying with the Gothic convention, rather than to frighten the viewer.

The cinematic world of Steampunk Gothic is visibly filled with monsters and supernatural creatures. This dark and shadowy universe offers the lore of alternative or developed literary motives, bringing together characters from the horror and Gothic legacy, and motifs of obsession, insanity, occult, death and decay, awakening of the supernatural powers, transgressing the world of the living and linking it inseparably with the realm of the dead. Frequently it combines beliefs of distinct cultures, religions and mysteries of the ancient world, at the same time expressing the criticism of the contemporary industrial world and its affairs. While realising Jeff VanderMeer's previously mentioned formula of the Steampunk fiction, cinema and TV also project the Steampunk-styled speculation on the dangers and threats, as well as consider positive possibilities for humans, standing on the verge of apocalypse brought about by the careless exploitation of accessible sources and science, as well as the disregard for the forces beyond our understanding.

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